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SENIOR NURSE ADMINISTRATORS
AS DECISION MAKERS
IN AN ERA OF
ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

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of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the activities of senior nurse administrators as decision makers responsible for planning and policy issues in large hospitals. The focus is on the effect environmental change has on these decision makers. Nineteen-seventy-nine marked the end of a decade of considerable change for nurses, nursing and the health services of New Zealand.

In 1979 there were 46 nurses in appointed positions as chief, supervising principal or principal nurse of major regional or hospital nursing services in New Zealand. This total population was selected for the research study.

There was a 63% response rate to a mailed questionnaire sent in November 1979. The effect of having a very small research population is reflected in the quality of data. However, there is some very interesting material from which inferences can be made in light of the model developed by the researcher.

Seventy-nine per cent of the nurses participating in the study have been appointed to their present position from 1970 onwards and so have not had experience as an executive decision maker prior to the transitional era of the 1970's. Fifty-two per cent of these respondents have been nursing for more than 30 years and so have had long term exposure to working within bureaucracies. Fifty-six per cent of respondents have completed or partially completed university degrees and diplomas during the decade of the 1970's. Nursing qualifications do not reflect a move towards acquiring comprehensive registrations which became a possibility in this decade.

There is evidence of some changes in organisational structure and decision making strategies. Forty-one per cent of the respondents are no longer responsible to medical administrators for their decision making, 17% are part of executive management teams, and 19% report that they receive important information for decision making by means of group discussion. There is also evidence of these nurses acknowledging formal organisation group structures. If these nurses are active participant members in these groups, then it can be conjectured that not only will the organisation, but maybe these groups will also be buffers to the effects of environmental change.

The use of economic aspects of health services as indicators of information, that is considered as important by these decision makers, is a means of ascertaining subjective material. It is clearly demonstrated that finance and manpower have major effects on these nurses' decision making processes when compared with other input economic aspects of health services. Output aspects that are seen to be interlinked with finance and manpower, e.g. effectiveness of services, evaluation of quality of care, etc, are also seen to have considerable or very considerable effects on their decision making processes.

The results of this research study demonstrate that these nurses are responding to environmental change with some individual, geographical and organisational differences being evident.

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PREFACE

This thesis was designed and the data collection undertaken in 1979. At this stage the author was in middle management as charge nurse of a surgical ward but became a principal nurse of a 1,000 bed psychiatric hospital in November 1979. Delays in completion of this thesis were caused by the supervisor and then the author going overseas on study leave.

The final write up of the thesis has been undertaken in 1982. This has had the advantage of updating the literature review in reference to more recent supportive texts. Also, the author has been able to write the thesis within the context of personal experience of being a senior nurse administrator herself.

The author completed her comprehensive nursing qualifications in 1972. All her nursing programmes were undertaken in hospital based schools of nursing as Technical Institute nursing programmes were only started in 1973 in New Zealand. Since 1973 the author has undertaken a baccalaureate degree in social sciences with a nursing major followed by study in graduate papers in business studies (all with health care orientations).

The background and interest of the author in health service organisational change and nursing responses to these changes have been motivating forces for undertaking this particular investigation.

This thesis endeavours to identify activities undertaken by senior nurse administrators at the outset of their decision making on major policy and planning issues. The identification of information generally perceived as

important input is of particular concern. The external environment within which these nurses are making decisions about nursing services and nursing education is that pertaining to the 1970's. A time which has been recognised as an era of considerable social, organisational and economic change and which has been an important period for nurse administrators.

CHAPTER ONE

HEALTH ORGANISATIONS AND THEIR ENVIRONMENTS

INTRODUCTION

An organisation does not exist in a vacuum but in a dynamic environment which interacts with the organisation and influences its structure. Likewise, the organisation interacts reciprocally with its environment. Within the external environment there are forces - political, economic, social and technological - that also interact and generate their own dynamic properties. The more complex the external environment, the greater the possibility of dynamic interplay of forces resulting in the effect of impact at the interface of the organisation and the environment. This effect of impact may in turn result in organisational change and the development of complexity of organisational structure as a response. With, of course, the converse being true, that is, the more stable the external environment the less likelihood there is of change in organisational structure. Issues of organisational structural changes as a response to the types of environmental contexts and forces which encompass organisations are well discussed by Emery and Trist (1966, 1973), Kingdon (1973), Harrison (1975), Katz and Kahn (1978), and Kaluzny et al (1982).

As a response to the present day complexity and turbulence of the external environments, in which hospitals are expected to function, there is evidence of developing complexity of organisational design of hospitals (Rakich, Longest and Donovan 1977, Kaluzny et al 1982, Brager and Holloway 1978).

Health care organisations are human service organisations with an improved quality of life for clients being the goal and outcome criterion of the organisation. As a 'people organisation' it is very important to consider how the

health providers are functioning and how their roles change in response to changing organisational structures which in turn are the result of external environmental change. Nurses constitute the largest section of the health service work force. Activities of nurses, as indicators of the magnitude or effects of any change, are an appropriate focus for this thesis.

All aspects of nursing involve problem solving as a primary activity. At the work face problem solving is concerned with "hands on care" in the case of physical illness or disability, or with therapeutic nursing interventions. At the apical point of the nursing hierarchy of activities, the problem solving behaviour is concerned with administrative and policy decision making. It is the senior nurse administrators who are involved with this higher level activity. These particular nurses are very close to the interface of the organisation with the environment and the impact of the effect of environmental forces which could be assumed to have influence on and be reflected in their decision making activities.

It is possible to examine executive decision making using the rational perspective of classical or behavioural theorists, through a contingency approach or by taking an ecological or evolutionary perspective (Kaluzny et al 1982).

It is important when examining executives as decision makers to identify:

- from what sources do they get their information?
- who are their significant others in the decision making process?
- what are the significant environmental influences that are indicative of their responses to organisational and environmental change?

Therefore, if one is to examine how health service organisations are responding to environmental change, then one can focus on the senior nurse administrators and their decision making activities in the area of the nursing aspect of the patient care delivery system.

A DECADE OF CHANGE

The decade of the 1970's has been an era of considerable change for nurses, nursing and the health services of New Zealand. Important developments impinging on the work of nurse administrators are as follows:

- *The concerted move by administrators - in the New Zealand Nurses' Association, Health and Education - to have nurse education student-based and in the general system of education.*

The result of this being the introduction and commitment to a national policy of increasing numbers of technical institutes offering basic and post basic nursing programmes with associated decrease in hospital schools of nursing programmes and intakes. University education has also become a reality for registered nurses concerned about career development through tertiary educational qualifications.

- *Changes in organisational structures within health care organisations.*

The result of this has been alterations in lines of responsibility and decision making authority for nurse administrators.

- *Increasing professionalism and expectations of nurses and nursing.*

The result of this has been subscription to improved methods of patient care delivery, progressive autonomy in decision making, authority and accountability for nursing actions, professional responsibility congruent with consumer and other health professionals' expectations.

- *Changing economic and political influences on health services in line with the national economy.*

This has resulted in a move from affluence and expansion of health services to one of constraint, restraint and no growth philosophies being enforced on the maintenance and development of institutional health services.

- *Increasing activation and politicising of unions, consumer and pressure groups on the health services.*

This has resulted in increasing awareness of necessity for health administrators to acknowledge and utilise concepts related to economic aspects of health services as management tools and informed data bases for rebuttal against such pressure groups and for increased effectiveness and planning of health services.

- *Government policy supporting the integration of health services and de-emphasis of institutional health care for the populace.*

This has resulted in administrators of health services assuming a new focus and addressing many financial, personnel and other related organisational issues from different perspectives.

IMPACT ON NURSE ADMINISTRATORS

In this thesis the decision making of nurse administrators is examined against the environmental forces of the 1970's. In the next three chapters the author addresses the following issues: environmental definition and character; decision theory and typology; and the complexity of organisational structure and decision making that occurs as a result of environmental change.

Having set the decision maker (senior nurse administrator) against the background of the decision making environment, an overview of models of decision making, general and specific, is undertaken. The research exercise then endeavours to identify activities undertaken by senior nurse administrators at the outset of their decision making on major policy and planning issues. Of particular concern to the researcher will be the identification of information which is generally perceived as important and environmental influences that are taken into account by these nurse administrators. Also of interest will be the identification of any evidence of these nurses having a specific format for organising this material.

The research exercise was undertaken in 1979, the last year in a decade of considerable social, organisational and economic change impacting on the New Zealand health services, and those responsible for their administration. Input and output, economic aspects of health services, are used as indicators of the relative importance of environmental and informational influences.

The nursing service administrators' activities, at the outset of their decision making on major policy issues, is the focus of the data collection. This focus is used to demonstrate the effect of environmental influences and information on this group of decision makers during a period of change.